



**Matt Gillan.** *Songs from the Edge of Japan: Music-making in Yaeyama and Okinawa*

Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. xviii + 220 pages. Maps, 13 b/w illustrations, 16 music examples, bibliographical references, discography, index. Hardback, £55.00/US\$99.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-2404-8 (hardback); 978-1-4094-2405-5 (ebook).

THIS BOOK is a valuable addition to studies of Okinawan—and especially Yaeyaman—music. Its author, Matt Gillan, is originally from the UK and currently lectures in music at International Christian University in Tokyo. His book is largely the result of fieldwork carried out while living on the southern Okinawan island of Ishigaki between July 2001 and September 2002, and he also draws on shorter subsequent trips there as well as on research into Yaeyaman communities in both Okinawa and mainland Japan up to 2011. The book's main focus is on the songs of the Yaeyama group of islands, and the early part of the book provides a background and setting and investigates the place of both Yaeyama and Okinawa in the Japanese cultural imagination. Subsequent chapters focus on music in rituals—there is a chapter on lineages and preservation groups, and another on the annual Tubarāma song contest held on Ishigaki. A later chapter covers some of the professional Yaeyaman musicians who brought the music to the national stage as part of the Okinawan music boom of the 1990s.

The islands of Yaeyama were chosen for this study because of their rich musical culture that includes many different varieties of songs that have long fascinated Japanese musicologists and ethnomusicologists. Yaeyaman musicians continue to hold a special place in their islands' culture, and a disproportionate number were active in the Okinawan music boom that is still to some extent thriving in mainland Japan. The use of music in social rituals and local events also remains vital and commonplace in Okinawa, and especially so in Yaeyama.

Gillan analyses some of the cultural meanings of Yaeyaman music and assesses them through a contemporary perspective. While the emphasis is on traditional genres, he also refers to the interplay of contemporary music with the established genres. From smaller family-oriented gatherings and local rituals and events, the author broadens the perspective to look at ways in which ideas of *shima* or “place” have been imagined musically in a broader context within Okinawa, Japan, and the world. He presents some of the diverse range of music-making whereby Yaeyama has long been viewed as a “land of song.” Gillan is a musician himself and took part in several of the events he describes as a participant observer. In fact, it seems that he was so much in demand as a singer and sanshin player of traditional songs that he was in danger of becoming more of a participant than an observer.

Yaeyama was for a long period part of the independent Ryukyu Kingdom that had distinct culture, customs, and music of its own, as well as a language that, while related to Japanese, was incomprehensible to the Japanese people. Today, Okinawan music CDs are frequently included in the “world music” sections of Jap-

anese music stores rather than in the Japan sections. It is hardly surprising that the Okinawans acted as they did in bearing some of the responsibility for the decline of their own language in the face of colonial oppression, and they saw assimilation with Japan as their best means of survival. Attempts to place their music as simply another genre of Japanese music are not easy, and Gillan admits that there is comparatively little in mainland Japan to match the still-thriving position of music in everyday life in Yaeyama and Okinawa.

An important issue that arose during the fieldwork undertaken is that of the idea of being true to one teacher. After taking music lessons from the well-known Yaeyaman recording artist Yamazato Yūkichi, Gillan discovered that, despite Yamazato's high status in the recording world, he had to eventually stop taking lessons from him and change to another prominent teacher in one of the main Yaeyaman *fushiuta* (sanshin-accompanied song) lineages, Ōsoko Chōyō. The worlds of the professional musician and the respected teacher are often very different, and the groups who teach *fushiuta* have long lineages and pride themselves on what they perceive as the correct way to perform the songs. Finding a teacher also means one is expected to remain loyal to that teacher for the rest of one's life, and it is often frowned upon to have dealings with other schools or with some of the professional musicians who record or run folk-song bars. Nevertheless, Gillan seems to have successfully gained access to some of the strictly traditional local groups while for a time also performing regularly at a folk-song bar in downtown Ishigaki.

The chapter on the song *Tubarāma* focuses on this single important song and on the annual contest to find its best singer. It also looks at the various musical forms it can take and shows another dichotomy, this time between the idea that “the singer is master”—meaning his individuality is respected—and the fact that over the years it has become difficult to adhere to this idea in the face of increasing pressure to conform to certain standards of performance and regional dialect in order to impress the judges. In the following chapter, “The Okinawa ‘Boom’—Local Music on the National Stage,” this idea of “the weight of tradition” raises itself when the discussion turns to the popular trio Begin who have become famous not only in Yaeyama but also throughout Okinawa and mainland Japan. On a trip to the USA in their earlier days, Begin's singer Higa Eishō (misnamed in the book as Higa Shōei) came to the realization that American audiences did not want to listen to Yaeyaman singers performing what they regarded as inferior copies of Western songs. This led him to encourage the trio to explore their Okinawan roots by introducing the sanshin and local music into their repertoire. However, “the weight of tradition” is such that it was felt necessary to write original songs and to use the sanshin in a more playful role rather than attempting to perform the classic traditional folk-songs in a standard way. Gillan also discusses the ambiguities of their well-known song *Shimananchu nu takara* (Island people's treasures).

The book's focus lies heavily on Yaeyama. Because of this, the situation regarding the American military base issue in Okinawa is not touched upon, although it informs much of the music and culture of the main island of Okinawa. Since there are no bases in Yaeyama it has less relevance here. Despite the fact that the main body of research was conducted a decade ago, this is an important publication and

is still very relevant in a field where book-length studies in English on Okinawan music are rare indeed.

Since the book's publication, Gillan has added a companion blog on which he has included some video clips directly related to the book, including several from his fieldwork: <http://matsungane.wordpress.com/songs-from-the-edge-of-japan-music-making-in-yaeyama-and-okinawa-matt-gillan/>

John Potter  
*Okinawa University*